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WHAT THE HISTORIAN DEMANDS OF THE LIBRARIAN

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I AM to add a further ingredient to the historical cocktail which is being served to you this evening — and I am not sure whether my contribution mixes very well with the other items. However to reduce the confusion I shall limit myself to one topic — what you, as librarians, can do about historical records. I was heartened this afternoon to hear of the progress of your survey of local body records, and also of your proposed union catalogue of manuscripts. As librarians in this land of the sacred racehorse are seldom underworked and overpaid, it is with some trepidation that I dare to suggest any addition to the burdens you already carry; but the precarious state of the material of New Zealand history forces me to appeal to you to an extent which would not be necessary in other places where the State takes more interest in the preservation of historical records. The peculiarity of New Zealand conditions requires you to do rather more for the preservation of documents than would be expected of a librarian overseas. In this sense I am thinking of

Mrs. Allan, who was formerly on the staff of the Historical Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, gave this address in the session on The Provision of Materials for the Historian.

the librarian in a municipal library rather than in special museums and institutions; and I am thinking of what he can do for the records of the district served by his library. For once you get out beyond the four main centres, there are few institutions other than municipal libraries which can house and care for the records of their district. If the government had adequate storage for its own records, if it showed any appreciation of the size of the problem, if it had a scheme for local branches of the government archives in the larger towns, then your share in this task would be smaller. But persuading the government to make proper provision even for its own records is like trying to push an elephant along a road he doesn't wish to take. He moves, but the progress is very slow. It looks as if the Library Association will have to give a lead to the government instead of vice versa. You have already taken the initiative in organizing a survey of local body records — for which, of course, you have the government's blessing. It may well be that you will be called on increasingly for technical advice on records held by district government offices and local bodies. Mr. Rogers can give you an idea of the problem there.

I shall go on to discuss what you can do for unofficial records, but please remember that both official and unofficial records are equally important, and are complementary to each other. In both the destruction which has gone on in the past century has been on a colossal scale. We have no tradition of respect for the past. The problem in New Zealand is not yet at the stage of 'What shall we preserve?', but rather, 'Can we get anything preserved at all?'. Our losses by fire and neglect are shameful. Not many depositories in New Zealand are crammed with valueless material, though a few are crammed with excellent material for which more space should be found. It is important that we should care for what has survived, all the more so because there is so little of it.

The Empty Period of New Zealand History

On the whole our early period is more richly endowed with diaries and letters than the middle period, after the sixties. The period from 1865 - 1913 is a blank one for official records, owing to a series of fires crowned by the Hope Gibbons fire. It is also true that some families who hold old papers see nothing interesting in them after the end of the Maori Wars. People often realize that the beginning of a country is of historic interest, and that age may increase the value of a document. But they do not always realize that history is a continuous thing, and that more recent records are also important. You must provide for the historian of the future as well as for the one of today. There is an empty period of New Zealand history from the seventies until the Great War — empty of records. Biographers at present writing lives of Seddon and of Pember Reeves have difficulty

in finding anything written by these politicians. The gaps cannot be filled. You as librarians would do history a great service if you would make it your policy to collect original records, printed and unprinted, which are still held in your district. When you are unable to take them over yourself, perhaps you can persuade those who own them to take care of them. Documents of national importance should be housed in national institutions and scientific papers are best housed in museums which specialize in the subject concerned. But there are many valuable records, mainly of local interest, which should remain in local institutions in the districts to which they refer. They lose by being transplanted from their natural surroundings. These local records should be your special concern.

You are the best people to take over district records. Under present conditions you are often the only people who can do so. You have a building, you have technical training, and you have a standard of professional ethics. Historical Societies and Early Settlers Associations often do not make good custodians. They stir up enthusiasm, and help promote an attitude of respect for documents, but they usually do really valuable work only when they co-operate with a local library or museum. They have no proper training in the care of documents, and unwittingly do dreadful things. They paste items into albums with bad paste, they bind incomplete items in a series together without leaving space for missing numbers, they break up collections, they lend material out without keeping a proper account of the transaction. I even met a surgeon in one society who had read in some publication that in America, if a document was too big to be put away unfolded, custodians had no hesitation in cutting the document into pieces of the right size to make it fit. He was therefore ready to carve up documents with the same ease as he carved stomachs. Perhaps a Society does none of these things; but it does not arrange its material well, does not sort it properly. If the labour is both voluntary and unpaid, the chances are that the material is not available for inspection from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; so that anyone wanting to consult it would have to make special arrangements. Sometimes societies cannot be trusted to have an objective approach. They may confuse scandal with history, and try to keep the titbits in limited circulation. There is also a danger from the changing personnel of committees. A committee may seek technical advice, and have the good sense to follow it, and do some good work. Then some eccentric comes on to the committee and undoes much of the good work of his predecessors. Documents, in fact, need trained custodians.

The Vanishing Private Collector

I think the heyday of the private collector of manuscripts in New Zealand is over. In the old days when libraries were inadequate and disinterested, private collectors performed a valuable service by saving

much excellent material from destruction. Some of our more notable libraries have been built up by private collectors like Dr. Hocken and Alexander Turnbull. Other libraries have received valuable gifts. In the long run historians have greatly benefitted from the activities of the private collector. But in this age which Mr. Miller labels that of the common man, professional men have less time and money for the expensive hobby of collecting. Moreover collectors have this drawback: they do not always make their material easily accessible to others in their lifetime. There are notable exceptions to this. But it is perhaps expecting too much of human nature to demand that a man who has spent a large sum of money for an item or who has devoted years to wheedling a diary out of a family, should hand over his treasure freely to any historian who knocks at his door.

Business firms often hold records of value, and you would do well to visit likely firms in your district. Too often companies do not appreciate the value of their records, which they destroy freely once they are no longer needed for current operations. Banks and other lending institutions may impose restrictions on the use of their material, because they must be discreet about the affairs of their clients. If such restrictions are imposed, they must be respected. The important thing is to save what you can. My own experience is that records held by companies suffer more from the threat of destruction than they do from limitations dictated by discretion.

Family Papers

You should also approach families who own valuable papers. The right of families to retain their own papers is undeniable, and so, of course, is their right to restrict their use. There is no doubt about that. It is just unfortunate that when families hold records of national importance that they can destroy them or refuse access to them. Most family records are destroyed because the family considers them so much junk. We are all familiar with the bonfire which relatives hold a few weeks after the funeral of an older member of the family. Such fires are deliberate. Others are accidental. Sometimes papers are left in attics and outhouses where water and rats do their work. Sometimes families quarrel, and one party burns the papers to prevent another from seeing them. Sometimes papers are burned because the contents are considered too scandalous — and the family skeleton, complete with cupboard, is destroyed. People do not realize the importance of the integrity of a collection. Relatives may divide it among them, they may lend parts until much is scattered and lost.

From the historian's point of view it is often difficult to get intelligent access to records held by families. Some families are very enlightened. They leave you alone with the documents, and they help all they can. Modern historians don't want to take originals home. They might have a fire themselves. But they want to look at the

records, and to be allowed to have some copied. Approaching families can be a frustrating business. You must crawl on your belly, and beg. You may be asked for your pedigree. I am always so ashamed that I cannot produce a prime minister or four generations of sheep station owners in my ancestry. If you are one of the élite, you will probably be made welcome, but it will be assumed that you will use great discretion in publishing. If you are an outsider your reception is less sure. Of course, hosts may have reasons to be suspicious. Some historians in the past did not hesitate to borrow items they had no intention of returning. I believe our honesty is improving.

The historian must visit a family at its convenience. The children may have measles, or the hostess be indisposed. When you do go, you may find that several elderly ladies have been invited to inspect you over a polite cup of tea. While you genteely fork a piece of sponge, and talk sweet nothings, you see on a table all sorts of old diaries which you obviously won't have time to read. You will be shown little bits here and there, and told about others. Your hostess is acting from the best of intentions, but doesn't understand what you want. Possibly she will produce some typed extracts made by herself. These will almost certainly have corrected grammar and spelling. Passages considered uninteresting or unsafe may have been omitted. Or the hostess is garrulous, and tells you many inaccurate family legends. Some times you are allowed to inspect all the records, and to use what you like. In other cases your notes are heavily censored. Poverty often ranks with crime as an unmentionable, which is foolish when you consider the serious depressions New Zealand has experienced. Usually the misdemeanours of members of a family are of no interest whatever to the historian, who is not a muckraker. The incidence of certain types of crime at different periods may interest him, but the names of the criminals are often of little importance. You can be discreet about names and still make your point, in many cases; in others it is necessary to give the name to give a story any significance.

We all find it difficult to be impersonal about our ancestors. We tend to bask in the reflected glory of their achievements, and to conceal their failings. I don't know whether this delicacy of feeling stems from intellectual timidity or from intellectual hypocrisy, but its roots are deep. The access to papers in undoubtedly easier when they are held by an institution.

You will find the acquisition of papers a ticklish business, although you have the prestige of an institution behind you. Donors may impose conditions which you must honour, but try to persuade them to make all the material available after their death, if not before. If you cannot get the originals, get copies, if possible true copies. If sections must be omitted, show where the omissions occur. Having acquired the documents, you must arrange fireproof and ratproof accommodation for them, even if you can only afford a cupboard lined with asbestos. Make them as safe as you can.

On the technical side, I would plead for a few minimum conditions of work for the research worker. I don't expect too much. First, please keep records moderately clean. Cover them, either with brown paper and string, or in cardboard boxes, if your funds are limited. I must admit that the filthiest records I have handled have been government records. Some have been so thick with rat dirt that I felt ill. One of my colleagues once found the remains of a dead cat on the records he was consulting in a government cellar. When I was a starry-eyed young graduate in my first research job, I accepted all the grime as part of the romance of the job, but grime loses its attraction as one grows older. How often have I said, 'I must wear my old clothes today — I'm going to the library.'

Second, please give the research worker a quiet corner with a table and chair, where he won't be disturbed by book borrowers chattering about their daily affairs. Have the table near a good light. It is very tiring to have to stand for hours, or to work squatting on the floor.

Third, please sort your records. I know that with the present staff resources that you cannot undertake any extensive indexing, but it would help if you could sort your records, and give a brief list of contents with inclusive dates. So many libraries have a little black hole of Calcutta somewhere out the back, furnished with boxes of unsorted papers.

Fourth, in certain circumstances, please allow the research worker to consult your newspaper and periodical stacks. Many of you do this already. Research workers realize that you cannot allow a free-for-all, and that great confusion would prevail if people had free access to the stacks. But in the case of periodicals, when a research worker wants to search through the volumes of several years quickly, he feels an awful cad asking a librarian for first one heavy tome and then another, especially when he knows they must be carried a long distance and up stairs.

And, finally, please find out what copying facilities are available in your town. Travelling is expensive, and historians like to have records copied quickly, and if possible cheaply.

I don't want you to think that I am grousing or ungrateful. I have been well served in the past. Any research worker would agree that you give your services willingly to the limits of your staff resources. You are already doing a great deal for us. Your book interloan service helps us enormously. I am asking you to adopt the policy of collecting local historical records because, under our present conditions, you are the only people who can do that. If we are indifferent to the material of our history, our claim to culture is slender indeed. I therefore ask you to garner while you may.